



Edinburgh Old Town Association Newsletter

April 2020

Unprecedented Times

This has become the new cliché! But it is the nature of clichés to be true. Since mid-March all of us have experienced changes and restrictions to our daily lives which are indeed unprecedented in peacetime. At the time of writing there is no telling how long these will continue or what life will look like when the restrictions are lifted.

The photo-essay in this edition shows scenes in and around the Old Town in the lead-up to the 24 March lockdown. The empty streets and deserted tourist magnets are certainly unprecedented.

Like everything else, the activities of the Association have been affected. At one point we were unsure whether it would be possible to get paper copies of this newsletter printed and distributed to members. If that had not been possible we planned to email it to those members for whom we have email addresses. Email is a quick (and cheap) means of communication. If you are one of the members for whom the Association does not have an email address you will find a slip enclosed with this newsletter asking whether you have (or have access to) an email account and whether you would be willing for us to contact you by that means. If so, please send an email to us (info@eota.org.uk) from an email address through which we can make contact. The Association will not share email addresses with any other individual or organisation. Nor do we propose to stop posting out paper copies of the newsletter (unless an individual asks to receive it only by email).

As we informed members for whom we already have email addresses, the Annual General Meeting due to take place on 26 March had to be postponed. The Review of 2019 by our Convener Barbara Logue would have been tabled at that meeting. A copy is enclosed. It includes summary accounts for the year to 31 August 2019. The full accounts can be found on the Association's website.

The AGM would also have elected the committee for the year. There are vacancies on the committee and those members willing to continue would have been up for re-election. If any member of the Association wishes to join the committee – we are an informal and friendly bunch – please write to the address at the foot of this page or email info@eota.org.uk.

The Association's programme of activities has also had to be suspended. Later in this newsletter there is a taster of some of the things which were lined up and which, all being well, will be re-scheduled before the end of the year.

And when it's all over?

Barbara Logue's review outlines issues that continued to be of concern during 2019 and no doubt many of those will come to the fore again once the current crisis has passed. These include travel into and around the Old Town. Earlier in the year, on the Association's behalf Barbara attended a workshop on the Council's City Mobility Plan and below she reports on some of the proposals, and concerns, aired there.

It is a safe bet that the impact of tourism will move back up the agenda in due course. We report on some recent research producing depressing, but unsurprising, findings on the prevalence of short term holiday lets in the Old Town.

And finally, we look at a programme of work on street lights which, in time, could have a welcome impact.

City Mobility Plan

The City of Edinburgh Council has held further workshops recently on the City Mobility Plan which is part of the Connecting People, Transforming Places initiative that was mentioned in the January 2020 newsletter. Although Edinburgh has 'an excellent bus system, an efficient tram line and great walking and cycling routes' the continued growth of the city has resulted in Edinburgh ranking amongst the most congested cities in the UK and could prevent the achievement of the target of making it a carbon-neutral city by 2030. It is felt that radical change in the way people and goods move in and around the city is essential.

Workshop activities explored new proposals on the following topics:-

- Public Transport
- People-friendly streets
- Planning new development
- Managing demand

Public Transport. Ideas included the creation of segregated cycling routes along main arterial routes to provide for quick and safe journeys by bicycle, supporting the transition

to cleaner vehicles by developing a comprehensive network of electric vehicle charging points, and the integration of taxis into the public transport system.

People-friendly streets. The most carbon-heavy part of delivering goods and packages is the final stage from depot to door. Developing distribution centres to co-ordinate deliveries and click-and-collect hubs across the city would result in fewer freight vehicle trips. Transport hubs which would service smaller delivery vehicles would mean less pollution and road damage in the Old Town. The expansion of the tram network in the city and potentially into the wider region would carry high volumes of people in a clean and efficient way. The importance of pedestrianisation was stressed.

Planning New Development. The level of parking in and around new developments would be controlled. There would be requirements for car clubs, electric vehicles and bike hire provision and targets for walking, cycling and public transport use. The coordination of these modes of transport is important. With these measures it is hoped that travel behaviours could be modified.

Managing demand. The level of on-street parking in areas well-served by public transport would be reduced. This would create space for public transport, walking and cycling. There would be provision for residents and those with mobility issues. The introduction of a congestion charge to reduce the number of vehicles in the city would be explored. Consideration would be given to the concerns of peripatetic workers and possible exemptions to the proposed 'workplace parking levy'. A city operations centre to monitor and control travel, transport and roadworks across the city would be developed.

Points of concern were raised during discussion:-

- The emphasis on cycling and walking as ways of moving round the city excludes those who have mobility issues.
- 100,000 people travel to Edinburgh by car for work and catering for their needs has to be addressed.

- There needs to be an assessment of how many charging points are needed and how and when they will be provided.
- A congestion charge is contentious and unpopular.
- The proposal to extend the tram network is controversial.
- The coordination of these plans would require a great deal of 'joined up thinking'.
- There were concerns about the financing of the proposals and where the money would come from.
- Congestion in Edinburgh must be dealt with and the target of a carbon neutral city by 2030 is admirable. How this is to be achieved involves difficult decisions and there will have to be future consultations and workshops to help the process.

Short-term holiday lets

In February *The Guardian* newspaper published the results of research it had done on the number of active Airbnb listings across Britain and cross-referenced these with government housing stock figures to calculate the rate of short-term lets in 8,000 areas. It was found that 67% of listings were for entire properties (in other words, they removed properties from the housing stock). Across Britain as a whole there were 0.8 Airbnb listings for every 100 homes. In some Devon coastal communities there were 23 listings per 100 homes and in north-west Skye 25. The Old Town of Edinburgh had by far the highest rate anywhere in the country with 29 Airbnb listings for every 100 homes. Airbnb has said the findings are based on “unreliable scraped data and flawed methodology”. But they correlate with other, specifically Scottish research.

In January Andy Wightman, Scottish Green Lothian MSP, launched an online tracking tool to chart the scale of short-term lets available across Scotland. The tool (www.homesfirst.scot) allows people to report properties in their local area that are operating as commercial lets. Early figures show 359 commercial short-term lets in Edinburgh recorded so far, of which only one has planning consent according to information publicly available from the city council. The council’s position is that

commercial short-term letting is a material change of use requiring planning permission. On that basis, 358 of the 359 listed are unlawful.

To its credit, Visit Scotland recognises on its website that over-tourism is a problem “especially in Edinburgh ... [and] can not only make for an unpleasant visitor experience, but also undermine the quality of life for residents by placing undue stress on public transport and infrastructure”. The website includes a number of recommendations to visitors, including staying in properly licensed accommodation. That is welcome, as are planned new licensing powers for local authorities. However, as Andy Wightman has commented. “they will not be of much use if owners are so willing to flout planning laws”. He also said “The Scottish Government’s commitment to regulation is further undermined by the fact that Visit Scotland, which has a strategic partnership with Airbnb, is actively promoting holiday accommodation that is unlawful despite encouraging visitors to book only licensed and regulated accommodation. Scottish ministers should ask their own tourism agency to stop advertising unlawful businesses.”

Is it too much to hope that one positive outcome of the current crisis might be that the number of short term holiday lets in the Old Town reduces? Surely government support for struggling businesses is not going to go to ones operating unlawfully? So perhaps making properties available for longer term residential lettings might become a more attractive option for owners.

More light

The city council has embarked on a programme of replacing street lights across Edinburgh because many of the existing lights are no longer made and cannot be maintained. The council say that the new lights will use 60% less energy and will avoid £54m of energy, maintenance and disposal costs over 20 years. We are told that the new lights will be whiter and clearer than the existing ones and that there will be less light spill: roads and pavements will be better lit but less light will

escape upwards to shine into peoples' homes and gardens. Work was due to take place in the city centre, including the Old Town, between April and June but given the current situation it seems likely that the timetable will slip. The council says that it will take around 15 minutes to replace each light and as they will not generally be replacing the street lighting columns there should not be disruption. Existing heritage lights will be replaced like-for-like and upgraded to LEDs.



An interesting new bit of lighting has been installed as part of the work Edinburgh World Heritage has done on Jacob's Ladder on Calton Hill. This of course is not in the Old Town. But, as our photograph shows, it certainly catches your eye if you are walking along Jeffrey Street around dusk.

Empty streets...

In the run-up to Easter, the Old Town is usually busy. Not this year. Here is the National Museum on the last day it opened; usually a hive of activity.



Bobby's nose enjoying a welcome respite and no selfie-snappers outside "Harry Potter's Birthplace".



Spot the tourist in the Grassmarket.



With less traffic around the terrible state of some of our road surfaces becomes even more apparent. This is Victoria Street:



Below is the east end of the High Street. Much of the damage in Victoria Street has been caused by tour buses struggling to get up the steep slope. Incredibly, tours buses continued to run (mostly empty) right up to the 24 March lockdown.



The current situation has served to re-emphasise the importance of these “green-lungs” around the edge of the city centre – and how regrettable the increasing commercialisation of Princes Street Gardens is in denying local people unrestricted access to that space. Here we have people enjoying the spring sunshine (and generally observing the social

distancing guidance) on Sunday 22 March in Holyrood Park, on Middle Meadow Walk and Calton Hill:



OTA Annual General Meeting

Due to Covid-19, the Annual General Meeting scheduled for Thursday 26 March 2020 was postponed. We apologise for any disappointment and thank you for your understanding.

The AGM would have received the Convener’s report and accounts (see over), and elected the committee for the coming year. The committee for the past year is listed in the Convener’s Review of 2019 (enclosed) which was circulated to most members before the date of the AGM. Tim Williams wishes to stand down; all the other members are happy to continue. As there are vacancies and there were no nominations, the following would have been re-elected: Anja Amsel (Honorary President), Barbara Logue (Convener), Naomi Richardson (Vice-Convener and Events Secretary), Jean Fairbairn (Minutes Secretary), Rosemary Mann (Treasurer and Membership Secretary), Bill Cowan (Planning Secretary). Eric Drake (Newsletter Editor), Laura Harrington, Katie Kerr, Kate Marshall. For convenience, we shall deem these people to have been re-elected. We shall ask the Annual General Meeting in 2021 to homologate these actions.

EDINBURGH OLD TOWN ASSOCIATION

Scottish Charity No SC009217

ABBREVIATED ACCOUNTS FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 AUGUST 2019

RECEIPTS AND PAYMENTS

	2019	2018
	£	£
Receipts		
Members' subscriptions	845	882
Donations received (including gift aid)	222	193
Sales of tickets for events	1,229	1,139
Interest on deposits (gross)	<u>5</u>	<u>3</u>
Total receipts	<u>2,301</u>	<u>2,217</u>
Payments		
Cost of events	968	1,303
Stationery, telephone and postage	710	610
Website	194	-
Subscriptions	40	70
Conference fees	-	-
Donation to Cockburn Association (campaign against use of former Royal High School as hotel)	-	500
Donation to Edinburgh Central Library (restoration of <i>Edinburgh from Calton Hill, 1841</i>)	230	-
Miscellaneous	<u>8</u>	<u>11</u>
Total Payments	<u>2,150</u>	<u>2,494</u>
Surplus / (Deficit) for year	<u>151</u>	<u>(277)</u>

STATEMENT OF BALANCES AT 31 AUGUST 2019

	31.08.18	Receipts	Payments	31.08.19
	£	£	£	£
Cheque account	1,348	2,277	2,150	1,474
Deposit account	<u>5,228</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>-</u>	<u>5,233</u>
Total	<u>6,576</u>	<u>2,282</u>	<u>2,150</u>	<u>6,707</u>

Reserves: The balance includes £1,955 of long-term subscriptions relating to future years. The Association's policy is to keep unrestricted reserves of one year's expenditure (£2,500), leaving free reserves of £2,253.

The accounts have been independently examined by Geoghegans, Edinburgh and were approved by the Committee of Management on 3 December 2019 and signed on their behalf by Barbara Logue, Convener and Rosemary Mann, Treasurer.

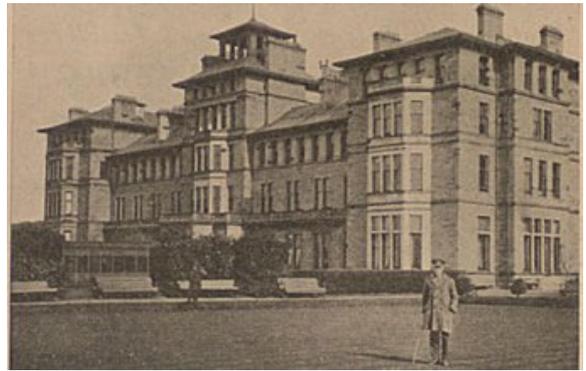
OTA Activities

Below we list some of the activities we had set up for our members. All have been put on hold and will be rescheduled once restrictions on travel and gatherings are lifted (fingers crossed!). We will let you know as and when dates have been fixed.

The second of the two visits to the Rare Books Collection of the University of Edinburgh (Monday 16 March) and the two visits to the Scottish Courts and Parliament Hall (Mondays 20 and 27 April) were postponed. Those with tickets will get priority when these visits are rescheduled and any free places will be made available to other members. Again, we will let you know.

The best way to keep you informed is by email. If you did not receive the email alerting you to the postponement of the AGM, then please send an email to info@eota.org.uk from an email address through which we can keep in touch with you.

The War Poets Collection. Edinburgh Napier University's Craighlockhart campus centres on a building which opened as a Hydropathic Establishment in 1880. During the First World War this was requisitioned for use as a hospital for the treatment of shell-shocked officers. It was here that Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon met and wrote some of their greatest poems. Now the building is home to the War Poets Collection which includes a permanent exhibition allowing visitors to gain an insight into the personal and social experiences of war through the words, memories, voices and objects that the officers, medical staff and relatives left behind.



Craighlockhart during World War One.



A tale of two explosions. Some Association members may recall the big bang which woke people across much of Edinburgh in the early hours of 21 April 1982. The cause was the explosion of a nasty cocktail of chemicals buried in a disused quarry at Craigmillar which had been used by a long-established family firm of firework-makers formerly based there. Fortunately, nobody was killed or injured.

Now almost entirely forgotten is another explosion, in 1867, involving the same family of firework makers. That explosion was in the heart of the Old Town and sadly caused several fatalities. Find out more about this fascinating story of life (and death) in the Victorian Old Town.

*The 1867 disaster in the Canongate.
From The Illustrated London News*

Abbey Strand. Back in February 2019 Sutherland Forsyth, Learning Curator at the Palace of Holyroodhouse, spoke to us about the planned work there, including new facilities in the Abbey Strand and the recreation of the physic garden which was the origin of the Botanic. (Members who attended will probably remember how splendidly Sutherland coped when the technology failed and he was not able to show his presentation as planned.) Sutherland has kindly agreed to lead us on a site visit. Our photographs show the physic garden in its current state (glimpsed from the top deck of a 35 bus) and an artist's impression of how it will look when complete.



Other Potential Events and Happenings

When talks and events at **Edinburgh Central Library** and the **National Library of Scotland** are running again details will be posted at www.eventbrite.co.uk/o/edinburgh-reads-1650684470 and www.nls.uk/events.

For future exhibitions at the **City Arts Centre** in Market Street and the other galleries and museums run by the city council, see www.edinburghmuseums.org.uk/whats-on.

The current temporary exhibition at the **National Museum of Scotland** in Chambers Street, *Tyrannosaurs*, was due to run until 4 May. Also at the National Museum, the Declaration of Arbroath was due to go on display for the first time in 15 years to mark the 700th anniversary of the creation of this key Scottish document. The display was to run from 27 March to 26 April but has been postponed until further notice. The museum will make an announcement when new display dates have been agreed.



The Declaration of Arbroath
© National Records of Scotland

The next scheduled exhibition at the **Queen's Gallery** at the Palace of Holyroodhouse is **Eastern Encounters**. The Royal Collection contains some of the finest South Asian paintings and manuscripts in the world. Tracing more than 400 years of literary and artistic output, the exhibition is intended to offer new insights into the shared history of the British Monarchy and the Indian Subcontinent. Eastern Encounters was to open on 3 April and run until 30 September. The opening has been postponed and the gallery hope to confirm a new opening date in due course.